



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## VI.

### SOME RECENT WORKS OF FICTION.

George Eliot's *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such*.

Frances Hodgson-Burnett's *Haworth's*.

George W. Cable's *Old Creole Days*.

IN no period previous to our own could it be said that the greatest living writer of English prose was a woman. This distinction fairly belongs to-day to George Eliot, whether we consider only her admirable style, or take into the account also her wide knowledge of human nature, and her equal powers of artistic combination and philosophic analysis. It is no doubt the equation of learning with observation, of philosophy with art, of thought with emotion, and of fineness with power, that gives to her style its characteristic qualities so difficult to describe by epithets. "*The Impressions of Theophrastus Such*," which we have classed as fiction, is a series of studies of character by an hypothetical bachelor; there is no thread of narrative, and no possibility of dramatic situation. It is by no means a slight work; George Eliot can hardly be said ever to have done anything that was slight. The book reveals all her fine qualities of acute observation and delicate analysis; but, because it does not tempt one to debate the handling of a plot, or the justness of a *dénouement*, it offers the best opportunity to examine, without distraction, the author's style.

The affluent dignity and long-drawn-out-ness of George Eliot's periods are more manifest, no doubt, to an American than to an English reader, for the manner of using the mother-tongue is, in this respect, very different on the two sides of the Atlantic. There is a rolling and long-linked continuity, turning ever back upon itself, in the sentences of an English newspaper leader, that is tedious to nervous Americans, while the English reader in turn is wearied with what seems a too eager vivacity and jerkiness in many of our writers. All Americans are fond of writing epigrams, said an English critic recently. Our prevailing method in the newspaper is to rush up

to a climax and fire off a salute ; the English writer is apt to move on with the stately tread of an archbishop in full canonicals, preceded by a procession of vergers. In the hands of weaker writers this resonant fullness of dignified period tends to run into no little involvement of meaning : one must keep one's wits about him in sailing through the eddying clauses and dangerous semicolons of the "Saturday Review." Even in the hands of Emerson the crisp and epigrammatic style in vogue in this country lacks something of dignity, but it is almost invariably clear and emphatic ; while in the prevalent mode of writing in England the contour of the idea is often concealed in the ample folds of the verbal drapery.

But this long and interdependent sentence is no obstacle to George Eliot's genius. If it had not been in vogue, she would perhaps have made it fashionable. She has a passion for enriching her periods, as she has of over-freighting her novels. As the loves of Adam and Dinah, of Daniel and Myra, had to be laden with a superabundant weight of admirable philosophy, description, analysis of character, and outshinings on conduct, so every separate period as it floats away has, in addition to its straightforward meaning, some new beauty of phrase, epithet, or digressive remark. Her finest things, instead of being brought out with emphasis as the climax of a sentence, are thrown in, like spools of cotton at a country store, as gratuities not accounted for in the price. There is a sentence on pages 76 and 77, just one hundred words long, with a dozen clauses, describing the matter-of-course lives that most people lead. In the middle of its specifications is dropped among the rest the saying that they "spend money on tedious observances called pleasures." Many a smaller writer would have set such a bit of irony by itself and cackled over it with a mark of exclamation.

The English amplitude of phrase is often cumbrous, even in George Eliot. An American is somewhat stunned by the hooking of adverb to adjective until the preposition or article is at such a distance from its noun that a mental grouping of the words is difficult, and pronunciation exhausting. Says Theophrastus Such, on page 76 : "Few lives are shaped, few characters formed, by the contemplation of definite consequences seen from a distance and made the goal of continuous effort or the beacon of a constantly avoided danger." One wants some such device as the algebraists'  $x(a - ab + xy^2)$  to keep in mind the fact that all the heavily-laden phrases of the last three quarters of this sentence swing mediately or immediately upon the little pivot of the preposition "by," and

the adverb and participle make a breathless separation between the article and its noun at the close of the sentence. Such locutions as "a constantly avoided danger" would be recognized as bad in any writer of less intrinsic greatness than George Eliot. If the order of words in a sentence makes it unpleasant to enunciate, something of the phonetic roughness is felt in reading silently. The hesitant and deliberate Parliamentary speaker would not stammer more than at other places, perhaps, when uttering such combinations as "additionally recognizable," but they are not pleasant either to the ear or the mind. George Eliot, however, takes the long, high-sounding sentence, characteristic of the present style of writing in England, and impregnates it in every part with meaning. It is no longer a vaporous way of saying common things in polysyllabic nouns, limited and weakened by polysyllabic qualifications; every word here enriches the sentence. One gets from such a sentence a feeling of completeness; the author is like the Greek temple-builder who artistically fills up all his space on pediment and metope with significant reliefs. Something of the same fullness one finds in Jeremy Taylor, but overlaid with a semi-barbaric abundance of ornament. To this complete fullness of significance in every word and line there is added in George Eliot a singular aptness in the choice of the very word needed. One might, by changing the gender of the unclassical Latin, apply to the author of "Theophrastus Such" Saint Augustine's commendation of Cicero, "*Ille verborum appensor ac mensor.*"

Wit in George Eliot is a subordinate quality. She uses it to carry the main point on which she is ever seriously intent. Her wit is of the intellectual order—not sought for mirth, but used as a means of enlightenment. One finds it commonly in a subordinate clause, where it seems to have occurred accidentally rather than to have been wrought with premeditation. In one of these essays, for example, the author alludes in a matter-of-course way to that "modern sect of Flagellants who make a ritual of lashing—not themselves, but all their neighbors." This is dropped after the sentence in which it occurs has achieved its purpose and spent its original force. It is only in a dependent clause, and in the midst of serious analysis, that one Lentulus is said to be "little gifted with the power of displaying his miscellaneous deficiency of information." So, too, *à propos* of one who is called an ass, the brute is defended in passing as an "intelligent and unpretending animal, who no doubt brays with perfect simplicity and substantial meaning to those acquainted with

his idiom." Of an educated man who has no decided preference for ideas or functions of his own, it is said that "his mind is furnished as hotels are, with everything for occasional and transient use." Americans will find ready application for the suggestion that habitual silence may pass for "administrative judiciousness," since a person who is always silent must often be "silent in the right place." And there is widespread and perpetual application for the saying that some minds seem "well glazed by nature against the admission of knowledge." A man hugging an illusion is said to be "well victualled and defended against a ten years' siege from ruthless facts."

There is so little of mirth or playfulness in this wit that one hesitates to call it by that name. Lack of lightness is the one most readily detected limitation of George Eliot's mind. The fable of "The Wasp credited with the Honeycomb" is a wearisome failure. For a fable demands a light and airy style, and this is told in sentences never light, and for their purpose often cumbrous. A fable should carry but one thought, and its whole momentum should be concentrated to give force to a single impression; our author overloads her fable until it is hard to recognize its central thought, and nothing is emphasized by it.

In gravity and large perception of moral issues, George Eliot reminds one of Wordsworth, albeit she is greater than Wordsworth. To this age of pure fiction the philosophical novelist is what the philosophical poet was to the preceding generation. And George Eliot is the finest example in literature of the great moral power of art where it is not used as a burden-bearer for cheap moralizing, but where it sees life and depicts life with an artistic feeling for its sublime moral relations.

When a new writer arrives who is indeed a new voice, and not a confused echo of voices already familiar, the first office of the critic is to ask what results characterize his work and by what methods he achieves his results or makes his impression. Mrs. Burnett, in her "That Lass o' Lowrie's," which appeared but a short time ago, and now again in "Haworth's," which has just been issued, has proved herself a distinctly new personality among our novel-writers. The veracity of her observation and the frankness and strength of her pictures of humble life give a raciness and vigor to her tales that are lacking in the paler and more refined work of some of our best American prose writers. For, though her two longer stories and some of the best of her shorter tales have to do

with Lancashire life, yet Mrs. Burnett's residence in this country will inevitably identify her with American rather than English literature. Even her handling of Lancashire life gains no doubt from her cisatlantic point of view, and some of her magazine stories have shown that she is capable of treating the ruder phases of American life with no less breadth than she shows in her Lancashire studies.

One may roughly classify novelists in two divisions: the first, those who excel in the portrayal of character; the second, those who depend chiefly on plot and dramatic incident for exciting interest. Fielding, Thackeray, and George Eliot, Walter Scott at his best, and Dickens in some sense, may be included in the first class, for instance. It is, in a word, the method of the very best writers of fiction to subordinate incident to the development and exhibition of character, and to make the interest of a situation depend on the quality of the person. It is a method impressed on English literature by Shakespeare himself, if it did not come down from Chaucer. The "storm and stress" school of romancers, represented by Reade and Collins, which seeks excitement chiefly in plot, is distinctly secondary and transient, notwithstanding the ability of some of the writers who are included in it. Applying this classification, which we have called a rough one, to Mrs. Burnett's "*Haworth's*," we should say that her best effects are produced by her character-study. Jem Haworth is a living reality to all her readers—a big, burly, vulgar, boastful, shrewd, indomitable man, who prefers perdition to failure, and whom one can not quite avoid liking. Briarley, "the poor misforchinit chap that's allus i' trouble," is very humorously and quietly set forth, while the sturdy little Janey is so well done that you would know her if you were to meet her in the street with a baby in her arms. The strength of Mrs. Burnett's gift for setting forth character is shown in the perfection with which she has done the whole Briarley group—the best drawn of any of the people in the story, though they have almost nothing at all to do with the plot, who could, indeed, one and all be dropped out of the story without seriously interfering with the development of its incidents. They have cost no pains, apparently, and there is barely an excuse for their existence in the slight relation they bear to the narrative, but the humor with which they are depicted diffuses a charm over the whole story. As often happens, the author has not been nearly so successful in those characters on which the greatest effort is expended. Rachel Ffrench is the weak point of the book. The Murdochs are better

than the Ffrenches, but the lowly characters are the best. Mrs. Burnett's imagination works in the direction and under the lead of her humor. But there is no ridicule in her treatment of humble life, and no vulgarity, but that cordial human sympathy that is most admirable in life and that gives the best results in art. Hawthorth's mother, for instance, is a delightful result of creative imagination working by sympathy.

We do not think that the author of "Haworth's" has yet reached her final methods of work. Her mode of developing her story and of revealing character in "Haworth's" is very remarkable. The narrative proceeds by emotion. Everything is pushed aside that does not contribute to the climaxes. The reader is carried from hill-top to hill-top, sometimes from crater to crater. There are advantages in this condensation. The eager novel-reader is borne along by the energy of the story; he shoots one set of rapids after another without giving time for his excitement to abate. But, if a sensational result is thus achieved, the artistic result is impaired. Nothing sets off the height of mountains better than an intervale, and nothing makes a reader feel more keenly the force of passion than a period of repose. Nor is the passion in "Haworth's" always graduated to the occasion. And, in Mrs. Burnett's treatment of the passion of love, one could wish to see it kindle a little more by degrees, and have time to test its effects upon the admirably individualized people. With the growth of her powers, and with that skill and repose that come from practice, Mrs. Burnett will no doubt apply to the depiction of passion that nice sense of light and shade evinced in her delineation of character.

"Romance and poetry, ivy, lichens, and wall-flowers need ruin to make them grow." With these words and others like them Hawthorne excuses the location of his "Marble Faun" in Italy because of the lack of elements of romance in life on this side of the Atlantic. But Hawthorne was a prophet come upon the stage a little after his time, if such as he is ever out of time. He wrote romantic fiction in an age already tending to realism; he succeeded in making ghosts seem real after scientific habits of thought and the influences represented by Wordsworthian poetry had quite put ghosts out of countenance. One can hardly help looking on his plea in the preface to "The Marble Faun" as an excuse used unconsciously for a temporary purpose. No man knew better than the author of "The House of the Seven Gables" that even under the gray sky of Puritan New England there were elements out of which he had

himself wrought some of the finest romance. Unhappily, our literature, so far, has been for the most part a narrow stream of New England thought and feeling ; Irving had, for a while, few successors in New York, and Poe no proper followers at the South. A country like ours is filled with the most various material for good novel-writing. There is surely no need for putting all the *dramatis personæ* of a story on shipboard and sailing them away to Europe in search of a background. That art is most fruitful, other things being equal, that roots itself in virgin soil. Very admirably have Mr. Howells and Mr. James helped us to national self-knowledge by their international stories, but we shall not have an American literature in the large sense until we learn to rejoice in the widely differing forms of human development shown on our own ground, and until we cease to apologize for our life, and proceed to refine it by the direct reaction of literature upon it. It is impossible to prognosticate the future of literary art ; but, if richness and diversity of material were the only things needed, the American Republic ought to produce presently—when the copyright law shall have been changed, perhaps—an æsthetic literature of the most picturesque and catholic sort.

And one may hold it to be a pretty sure mark in a new writer of the individuality and robustness which endure in art, that he does not seek some country already hallowed by literary association, but resolutely undertakes to break a path for his art through the untrodden thicket of the life that immediately environs him. Such a writer, if we may judge from work so slight as his first collection of stories, is Mr. George W. Cable, of New Orleans. That he knows New Orleans thoroughly, and is to the manner born, one perceives at the first dash. That he knows something else than New Orleans, and so has that very necessary requisite, the fulcrum of an outside standpoint, is equally certain from the entire absence of local prejudice, and the gentle and joyous humor with which creole life is revealed to the outside world. These short stories have some of the faults of inexperience : there are a few rather improbable happenings in some of them, such as would be rejected by a more practiced writer, because an improbable incident, even though it be but the transcript of a fact, disturbs the reader's illusion. But in a world so new as that which is here revealed to literature—a world so rich in new elements of romance, with its contact of a Saxon with a Latin and of both with a black race ; its families annihilated in epidemics, its children of lost parentage, its old aris-



ocracy, and its wild and picturesque forms of moral degradation—in such a world who shall say from without what is probable and what lacking in verisimilitude? And, in the important point of motive, the stories are never lacking, and never once strike a false note. Next to the correct and picturesque conception and delineation of character, the chief thing in story-writing is that the personages shall never break the law of their several natures, shall be evidently moved in all that they do by the natural action of adequate motive on their proper characters. It is here that the beginner in fiction most easily fails; it is here that Mr. Cable never falters. We have to complain of a little mistiness sometimes—the reader does not quite perceive how certain things have come to pass. This befogging of the reader by *hiatuses* is not a very worthy expedient, nor does it produce the most legitimate result. In “*Posson Jone*” and “*Sieur George*” the reader is like one guessing out a half-told riddle. But the life is finely idealized, the artistic spirit is through all distinctly dominant, the moral tone is thoroughly sane, there is a tropical richness of color, a Southern enjoyment of female beauty, a masterful handling of dialects with wonderful strokes of description. The “*Café des Exilés*,” for instance, makes a commonplace subject picturesque, and leaves an ineffaceable impression of place and character. All the stories have that indefinable something called charm. But they are all light—mere trials of the wing before flight. If the constructive power needed to organize a full-length composition exists in Mr. Cable, we shall have at his hands some day novels that will give a wholly new sort of life to American literature. One feels irresistibly that, where scenery, character, motive, and dialect are touched with so sure a hand, there is promise of important achievement.

EDWARD EGGLESTON.